Page Page Page

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Spies Should Compete

THE AMERICAN PUBLIC and its congressmen are getting what is probably a last look at operations of the Central Intelligence Agency. Need for greater care in espionage should be one of the lessons from the unsuccessful invasion-by-proxy of Cuba. But there is a danger that criticisms being made of CIA will lead to changes which would hamper all intelligence operations.

President Kennedy, although publicly taking all blame for the failure, has clearly had his faith in CIA badly shaken. His appointment of former Army Chief of Staff Maxwell D. Taylor to investigate all U. S. intelligence services may mean that he is preparing a replacement for CIA Chief Allen W. Dulles, should a replacement be demanded either by public opinion or Kennedy's personal judgment.

Major reorganization of all intelligence operations has been under serious consideration since Kennedy took office. It is only to be hoped that impetus provided by CIA's apparent failures in Cuba, Algeria and elsewhere will not result in too drastic a change. There has been considerable pressure in the Pentagon for replacing the military services' separate intelligence services with a single, centralized agency. Many congressmen will now take greater interest in this matter and are likely to find the centralization idea attractive. Some streamlining is probably in order, but it would be a mistake to eliminate separate military intelligence branches. A combined military-civilian agency to replace CIA's present organization might, however, produce useful results without losing the advantages of "competition."

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THE PURPOSE of eliminating separate military intelligence agencies would be to end what is wrongly called duplication of effort. Centralization would make it possible to present policy-making officials with brief summaries of material gathered in the field and processed in Washington. The trouble with this approach is that it would leave the President and his advisers with only one estimate of enemy strength on which to base their opinions.

A prime example of overcentralization in wartime was the German general staff's miscalculation as to what part of the French coast would be invaded by the Allies in 1944. Field Marshal Rommel and Hitler believed, by intuition, that Normandy would be attacked, but they were told by intelligence officers that a spot farther north was more logical. And that was where the strongest defense forces were placed.

The U. S. could make a similar fatal mistake in estimating subversion or military operations if intelligence came to the President from only one source. It appears, in fact, that Kennedy based his decision to let the Cuban invasion proceed mostly on a briefing from Dulles' assistant, Richard M. Bisell, jr. He did so over the reported objections of cabinet officers who had access to other sources of intelligence.

It has long been suspected that Army intelligence officers overestimate the size of Soviet ground forces, while the Navy overstates Soviet naval power. This is partly unintentional error, partly a desire to emphasize the importance of a particular service to budget-makers. A high degree of accuracy is obtained by comparing estimates of the different services. This will be lost if the Cuban failure leads to an overzealous effort for greater efficiency.